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ABSTRACT

The need for effective communication is reflected in the increased number of privately sponsored technical writing workshops and in the increased demand for business and technical communication courses on campuses. In these learning situations the traditional methods that have been used to teach adolescents how to write become inappropriate. Writing done by professionals in business and industry is a uniquely difficult form of communication that demands conformity to conventions while simultaneously encouraging individuality. The emphasis on the conscious presentation of persona, or public self, distinguishes courses in technical communication from traditional undergraduate composition classes. Ignoring this realistic need to present the self deprives adult writers of the opportunity to develop the rhetorical skills that will permit them to perform successfully in their professional lives. Rhetorical development is impossible without the ability to confront, to interpret, and to evaluate the needs of each situation as it arises. Technical communication is more than simply reporting factual information, and failure to recognize this is a disservice to those who seek to learn the craft and those who teach. (HOD)

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TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION: MEETING THE NEEDS OF ADULT WRITERS

During the past year, I have noticed a recurrent ad that appears in The Wall Street Journal announcing a two-day technical writing workshop for professionals in business and technology. The ad invites "those who must communicate technical information" to attend the sessions. I am sure this expensive, tax deductible workshop draws participants from corporate headquarters and research laboratories: people acutely aware that their professional advancement depends on their ability to communicate effectively. This brief workshop moves from city to city promising to increase awareness of what distinguishes good technical writing and to show how to achieve it. The ad implies that personal fulfillment, greater job satisfaction, and even job security can be attained through the course.

Despite the advertising hyperbole, the ad focuses attention on the real need for effective communication in the fields of business and technology. This traveling workshop as well as similar university extension classes and in-house educational programs exist because of the growing realization that communication training enhances every professional's performance. These courses are responses to the on-the-job need for improved communication skills. Although the inability to prepare effective correspondence, proposals, and reports does not always preclude communication, it does undermine productivity. During our current economic uncertainties, this can be a costly

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handicap. The continuing ad in The Wall Street Journal affirms the fact that many people outside the university realize this and want to improve their writing skills.

NEED FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

This recognition of the need for effective communication is also reflected on campuses across the country in the increased demand for business and technical communication courses and the subsequent proliferation of these classes. Students may perceive what Andrews and Koester document in a recent survey (1979) to determine the professional shortcomings of entry-level accountants in C.P.A. firms, corporations, and government agencies.[1] Supervisors identified nonnumerical report writing as the most significant problem area. Asking the membership of most professional societies to describe the deficiencies of college graduates recently hired would elicit responses similar to that reported in the Andrews/Koester study.

Employer feedback as well as classroom experiences have alerted colleagues in the colleges of business, science, and engineering to the need for students to have more extensive training in written communication than received in basic composition courses. Many of these faculty members encourage the development of business and technical communication programs that meet the practical needs of career-oriented students. In addition, these upper division courses help demonstrate a department's and an institution's concern that their graduates develop proficiency in writing. This visible and verifiable commitment to improving communication skills aids in dispelling the public fear that college graduates may be unable to express themselves effectively.

Besides being popular among upperclassmen, these courses also have the potential to attract men and women from off campus who, like their counterparts attending a brief training workshop, seek to develop and refine their

job skills. The expectations of this complex adult audience preclude technical communication courses from becoming revamped, intensified versions of freshman composition or having a remedial focus. The maturity of the clientele for these courses must be reflected in their intent and their design if they are to succeed. In this learning situation, the traditional methods of teaching adolescents how to write become inappropriate. More than years separate the adult writer from the adolescent writer. Experience sharpens both individual's perspective of himself and his needs.

THE ADULT WRITER

Consultants who specialize in communication training for professionals in business and technology recognize the adult's heightened awareness and impatience when designing their workshops. Because their success depends on their ability to appeal to an audience, these instructors must quickly and consistently show workshop participants how the presented information is relevant for their successful job performance. Initially they do this by assiduously striving to give their short courses the appearance of being more than rehashes of business English and composition classes. Perhaps the continuing popularity of Rudolf Flesch's self-help book The Art of Readable Writing, and the communication workshops it spawned, stems from his belief that people realize the formal rhetorical training received during adolescence is inadequate for the demands of professional life. He attributes his audience's aversion to writing to uncertainty about how to create persuasive and meaningful prose

This confusion breeds frustration and anxiety, emotions that can undermine self-confidence. In order to increase the adult's sense of rhetorical control and subsequently his confidence, Flesch minimizes the difficulties inherent in communicating effectively. Unfortunately, this attempt at

reeducation increases confidence by making the task of writing efficiently look deceptively easy. Flesch's advice may even instill unwarranted self-confidence. By advising his inexperienced audience to "learn to write the way you talk...and unlearn the rules you were taught in school,"[2] he attempts to make them feel unrestrained. However, technical communication, like all disciplines, requires self-restraint.

Flesch's directions are appealing because they sound easy, look like fun, and require little concentration. The Art of Readable Writing, like the literature advertising technical communication workshops, implies that the barriers preventing writers from successfully expressing themselves are the misinformation learned and inapplicable advice received in composition courses. People who accept these assumptions may achieve a personally satisfying form of self-expression, but seldom will they achieve effective communication.

Transcription of speech, except when used to recreate dialogue, never sounds natural on paper. Naturalness, that aesthetically pleasing sonic quality, demands that we choose our words more carefully than we do in conversation. Its presence may pass undetected, but its absence is always noticed. Aristotle emphasizes in The Rhetoric that "naturalness is persuasive, artificiality is the contrary."[3] This important quality contributes to the overall effect that skilled writers strive to achieve.

Of course disregarding rules learned in school may be emotionally satisfying, but most are conventions. Few writers with professional responsibilities can ignore these rules of the game. These men and women have neither the rhetorical knowledge that would allow them to disregard rules selectively nor the skill that would allow them to compensate effectively. Those who

fail to conform to the conventions of grammar, spelling, and organization risk drawing attention away from the presented information. Instead, the focus may shift to the inadequacies of the presentation, seriously undermining credibility.

A UNIQUE FORM OF COMMUNICATION

Despite Rudolph Flesch's assertions, writing done by professionals in business and technology is a uniquely difficult form of communication that demands conformity to conventions and simultaneously encourages individuality. Imagination rather than blind compliance distinguishes effective correspondence, proposals, and reports. This fact becomes apparent to anyone who attempts to teach the discipline of technical communication conscientiously or to master it. No formulas exist that guarantee the success of either effort. Both require understanding of the communication process and skill.

Writing must be learned: people are not born with this facility. Although colleagues in all disciplines encourage efforts to develop this skill, many mistakenly assume that every member of a faculty possesses an innate ability to teach effective communication. A recent article in the Chronicle of Higher Education helps demonstrate the pervasiveness of this myth. This report summarizes the American Association of Higher Education's project to determine the retraining needs of mid-career faculty whose disciplines experience declining enrollments. Listen to the project director describe a hypothetical but possible retraining scenario. "If history enrollments are declining and the college needs teachers for technical writing, the administration may develop a seminar and ask faculty members if they are willing to teach classes...."[4]

Let's alter this scenario slightly. If the demand for American history or even Shakespeare began to grow rapidly and significantly, would anyone suggest offering colleagues from other disciplines a seminar so that they could teach the overflow? I am sure that history and English departments and the clienteles they serve would want instructors to have more than cursory knowledge of what they teach. Cosmetic retraining seldom creates an effective teacher. The implication that it provides adequate preparation for teaching technical communication reveals a common but inaccurate perception of this complex discipline.

Through their promotional literature, consultants specializing in communication training, and even educators who retrain faculty, may inadvertently contribute to this misconception. Ubiquitous ads emphasize the ease with which technical communication can be mastered. Despite this claim, a brief seminar or workshop can only provide an informative overview of the craft--no more than a superficial introduction. Short course participants, like The Art of Readable Writing's readers, may receive assurances that the challenges of the discipline can be successfully met, but increased confidence without a corresponding increase in the comprehension of the principles that underlie effective communication does not improve skill. This understanding must be shared by those who want to create successful communication and those who want to help others learn to do it.

Professionals in business and technology must know how to do more than merely use language correctly: they must learn to use it effectively. Correspondence, proposals, and reports are more than error-free forms of self-expression. Each must be designed for a specific purpose and audience.

Mature writers have the demanding responsibility of being both architect and builder. They devise a plan and carry it through. Rhetorical training that oversimplifies the writing process for these adults does them a disservice. They must realize that any successful form of expression requires forethought and complete concentration, a stressful combination. Rarely is writing a relaxing experience, unless done solely for personal entertainment.

THE CHALLENGE

The psychologist Masanao Toda succinctly defines the difficult challenge shared by adult writers in his description of communication as "a mixed process of control and observation. From the viewpoint of the sender, the sender is transmitting information for the purpose of controlling the state of the mind of the receiver. From the viewpoint of the receiver, the receiver is receiving information for the purpose of correctly representing the state of mind of the sender."[5] Skilled writers transmit information, but, in addition, they also strive to create an impression. These senders, or communicators, control the receiver's perception of their minds. All communication efforts can affect either positively or negatively an audience's response to the message and the sender. Achieving the control necessary to elicit the desired positive reaction requires self-discipline, an attribute not easily developed.

The emphasis on the conscious presentation of persona, or public self, distinguishes courses in technical communication from traditional undergraduate composition classes. Although the creation of any meaningful form of written communication is an act requiring solitude, the end products of technical communication, correspondence, proposals, and reports, become public. Professionals in business and technology and those preparing for

careers in these areas quickly recognize this fact and see their work as a reflection of themselves. The writer's public self stems from the authorial presence, an image conveyed through an organizational strategy, diction, and syntax.

Ignoring this realistic need to present the self deprives adult writers of the opportunity to develop the rhetorical skills that will permit them to perform successfully in their professional lives. These men and women, unlike adolescents learning to write, do not discover their subject, their ideas, or even themselves as they write. The process of discovery occurs through the gathering and analysis of data. For these adults writing is a process of efficiently presenting their information and themselves in a pleasing and professional manner. They design their work to accomplish a specific task and satisfy an actual audience. Achieving these goals requires the ability to analyze and adapt to audience.

Sociologist Arnold Larson's description of language's versatility illuminates the importance of adaptation in technical communication: "In our society we speak as we live--according to our roles. Our roles are many, and the ways we use speech are as numerous...And each of these roles requires a different use of language if the role player is with it."[6] Being "with it" means having the ability to adapt to changing situations. In writing this is impossible unless the writer understands language's pliable role in communication and can use it imaginatively. These are the goals of the effective technical communication course. They are achieved only through arduous student effort and a knowledgeable instructor's feedback.

Technical communication shifts the writer's attention from himself to his audience. His task is to solve the rhetorical problem of effectively

presenting both his information and himself." In addition, this challenge provides insights into the complexity of the communication process. This expansion of perspective helps clarify the fact that meaningful expression is a conscious act, requiring forethought and skill. This increased understanding permits adult writers to begin realistically assessing the difficulties inherent in the writing process and to recognize their sole responsibility for its results.

Rhetorical development, like emotional growth, is impossible without the ability to confront, to interpret, and to evaluate the needs of each situation as it arises. Despite claims to the contrary, these are difficult steps to master and to teach.

Technical communication is more than simply reporting factual information. Failure to recognize this is a disservice to those who seek to learn the craft and those who teach them.

ENDNOTES

[1] J. Douglas Andrews and Robert J. Koester, "Communication Difficulties As Perceived By The Accounting Profession and Professors of Accounting," The Journal of Business Communication, 16, No. 2 (Winter 1979), 33-42.

[2] Rudolf Flesch, The Art of Readable Writing (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1974), p. 210.

[3] Aristotle, "On Prose Style," in The Problem of Style, ed. J. V. Cunningham (New York: Fawcett Publications, 1966), p. 70.

[4] "Few Colleges Found to Offer Career Planning for Professors," Chronicle of Higher Education, March 9, 1981, p. 6, cols. 1-5.

[5] Masanao Toda, "About the Notions of Communication and Structure: A Perspective" in Communication: Concepts and Perspectives, ed. Lee Thayer (Washington D.C.: Spartan Books, 1967), p. 41.

[6] Arnold B. Larson, in Science, 139 (January 18, 1963), 245-246.